Why I embraced ISLAM

MARYAM JAMEELAH

HOW I DISCOVERED THE HOLY QURAN AND IT'S IMPACT UPON MY LIFE

My discovery of **Holy Quran** was tortuous and led me through strange by-ways but since the end of the road was supremely worthwhile, I have never regretted my experiences.

As a small child I possessed a keen ear for music and was particularly fond of the classical operas and symphonies considered the high culture in the West. Music was my favorite subject in school in which I always earned the highest grades. By sheer chance, when I was about eleven years old, I happened to hear Arabic music over the radio which so much pleased me that I was determined to hear more. As soon as I heard Arabic music, Western music at once lost of all its appeal for me. I would not leave my parents in peace until my father finally took me to the Syrian section in New York City where I brought a stack of Arabic recordings for my gramophone. The one I liked best was a rendition of the **Surah Maryam** of the **Holy Quran** chanted by Um Kulthum. Then in 1946, I could not foresee what an evil woman she was to become in her later years; I admired her for her beautiful voice which rendered those passages of **Holy Quran** with such intense feeling and devotion. It was by listening to these recordings by the hour that I came to love the sound of Arabic even though I could not understand it. Without this basic appreciation of the Arabic musical idiom, which sounds so utterly strange to the Westerner, I could not possibly have grown to love Tilawat (Recitation). My parents, relatives and neighbors thought Arabic and its music dreadfully weird and so distressing to their ears that whenever I put on my recordings, they demanded that I close all the doors and windows of my room lest they be disturbed! After **I embraced Islam in 1961**, I used to sit enthralled by the hour at the mosque in New York, listening to tape-recordings of Tilawat (Recitation) chanted by the celebrated Egyptian **Qari, Abdul Basit**. But one Fuma Salat, the Imam did not play the tapes. We had a special guest ---- a short, very thin and poorly-dressed black youth who introduced himself to us as a student from Zanzibar; buy when he opened his mouth to recite **Surah ar-Rahman**, I never heard such glorious Tilawat (Recitation) even from **Abdul Basit**! This obscure African adolescent possessed such a voice of gold; surely **Hazrat Bilal** must have sounded much like him!

From the age of ten I had developed a passion for reading all the books about the Arabs I could lay my hands on at school or at the public libraries in my community, especially those dealing with the historical relationship between the Jews and Arabs, but it was not until more than nine years later that it ever occurred to me to satisfy my curiosity about the **Holy Quran**. Gradually, however, as I neared the end of the Arabs who had made Islam great but Islam

which had raised the Arabs from wild desert tribes to the masters of the world. It was not until I wanted to find out just how and why this had happened that I ever thought to read the **Holy Quran** for myself;

In the summer of 1953 I overstrained myself at college by taking an accelerated course of too many subjects. That August I fell ill and had to discontinue all work for the remainder of the season. One evening when my mother was about to go to the public library, she asked me if there was any book I wanted. I asked her for a copy of **Holy Quran**. **An hour later she returned with one-a translation by the eighteenth century Christian missionary and scholar-George Sale.** Because of the extremely archaic language and the copious footnotes quoting from al-Baidawi and Zamakhshari out of context in order to refute them from the Christian viewpoint, I understood very little. At that time, my immature mind regarded **Quran** as nothing more than distorted and garbled versions of the familiar stories from the Bible! Although my first impression of **Holy Quran** was unfavorable, I could not tear myself away from it. I read it almost continuously for three days and nights and when I had finished, all my strength had been drained away! Although I was only nineteen, I felt as weak as a woman of eighty. I never recovered my fully strength or energy afterwards.

I continued to nurse this poor opinion of **Holy Quran** until one day I found in a bookshop a cheap paper-back edition of **Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall's** translation. As soon as I opened that book, it proved a revelation! The powerful eloquence literally swept me off my feet. In the first paragraph of his preface, Pickthall wrote :

The aim of this work is to present to English readers what Muslims the world over hold to be the meaning of the words of the **Quran** and the nature of that Book in not unworthy language and concisely with a view to the requirements of English – speaking Muslims. It may reasonably be claimed that no Holy Scripture can be fairly presented by one who disbelievers its inspiration and its message and this is the first English at once recognize as unworthy. The **Quran** cannot be translated. That is the conviction of the old-fashioned Shaikhs and the view of the present writer. The Book here is rendered almost literally and every effort is made to choose befitting language, but the result it not the **Glorious Quran**, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Quran—and, peradventure, something of the charm-in English. It can never take the place of the **Quran** in Arabic nor is it meant to do so.

I then realized why George Sale's translation was most unfair. From then on, I refused to read his or any other renderings of Holy Quran by non-Muslims. After reading Pickthall's rendition, I discovered other English translations by **Yusuf Ali**, Muhammad Ali Lahori and **Maulana Abdul Majid Daryabadi**. I found the commentation by Yusuf Ali and Muhammad Ali Lahori

offensive because of their apologetic tone and far-fetched and unconvincing attempts to explain away those passages conflicting with modern philosophies or scientific concepts. Their translation of the Text was also weak. Although Maulana Daryabadi's attempts to pattern his translation of the **Holy Quran** on the archaic style of the King Jame's version of the Bible most annoyed me, I found his commentary excellent, particularly those parts dealing with comparative religion and learned much from it. However, Pickthall's rendition remained my favorite and to this day, I have never found any other English translation that can equal it. The sweep of eloquence, the virility and dignity of the language is unsurpassed in any other translation. Most other translations commit the mistake of using the word "God" but Pickthall retains "**Allah**" throughout. This makes the message of Islam strike the Western reader as more authentic and effective. Throughout the darkest days during my years of hospitalization, I kept a paper-back edition of Pickthall's translation with me as my constant companion which I read over so many times, I must have worn to pieces of half dozen copies. May Allah abundantly reward Pickthall with the choicest blessings for making the knowledge about the **Quran** so easily and cheaply available to England and America! Were it not for him, I would not have been able to know and appreciate it.

After my discharge in 1959, I spent much of my leisure time reading books about **Islam** in the Oriental Division of the New York Public Library. It was there I discovered four bulky volumes of an English translation of Mishkat ul Masabih by Al-Haj Maulana Fazlur Rahman of Calcutta. It was then I learned that a proper and detailed understanding of **Holy Quran** is not possible without some knowledge of the relevant **Hadith**, for how can the Holy Text correctly be interpreted except by the Prophet to whom it was revealed? Those who disbelieve the Hadith also disbelieve the **Quran** for its revelation explicity tells us that one cannot follow what God wants us to do without an unquestioning acceptance of the authority of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).

Once I had studied the Mishkat, I began to accept the **Holy Quran** as Divine revelation. What persuaded me that the **Quran** must be from God and not composed by **Muhammad** (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was its satisfying and convincing answers to all the most important questions of life which I could not find elsewhere.

As a child, I was so mortally afraid of death, particularly the thought of my own death, that after nightmare about it, sometimes I would awaken my parents crying in the middle of the night. When I asked them why I had to die and what would happen to me after death, all they could say was that I had to accept the inevitable but that was a long way off and because medical science was constantly advancing, perhaps I would live to be a hundred years old! My parents, the remainder of my family and all our friends contemptuously rejected as superstition any thought of Hereafter, regarding Judgment Day,

reward in Paradise or punishment in Hell as outmoded concepts of by-gone ages. In vain I searched all the verbose chapters of the Old Testament for any clear and unambiguous concept of Hereafter. The prophets, patriarchs and sages of the Bible all receive their rewards or punishments in this world. Typical is the story of Job (Hazrat Ayub). God destroyed all his loved-ones, his possessions and afflicted him with loathsome disease in order to test his faith. Job plaintively laments to God why He should make a righteous man suffer. At the end of the story, God restores all his earthly losses but nothing is even mentioned about any possible consequences in the Hereafter. Although I did find the Hereafter mentioned in the New Testament, compared with that of **Holy Quran**, it is vague and ambiguous. I found no answer to the question of death in Orthodox Judaism, for the Talmud preaches that even the worst life is better than the best death. My parents' philosophy was that one must avoid contemplating the thought of death and just enjoy as best one can, the pleasures life has to offer at the moment. According to them, the purpose of life is enjoyment and pleasure achieved through self-expression of one's talents, the love of family, the congenial company of friends combined with the comfortable living and indulgence in the variety of amusements that affluent America makes available in such abundance. They deliberately cultivated this superficial approach to life as if it were the guarantee for their continued happiness and good-fortune. Through bitter experience I discovered that self-indulgence leads only to misery and that nothing great or even worthwhile is ever accomplished without struggle through adversity and self-sacrifice. From earliest childhood I have always wanted to accomplish important and significant things. Above all else, before my death I want the assurance that I have not wasted my life in sinful deeds or worthless pursuits. All my life I have been intensely serious-minded. I have always detested the frivolity which is the dominant characteristic of contemporary culture. My father once disturbed me with his unsettling conviction that there is no hing of permanent value and because everything in this modern age continually changes all the time, the best we can do is accept the present trends as inevitable and adjust ourselves to them. I, however, was thirsty to attain something that would endure forever. It was from the **Holy Quran** where I learned that this aspiration was possible. No good deed for the sake of seeking the pleasure of God is ever wasted or lost. Even if the person concerned never achieves any worldly recognition, his reward is certain in the Hereafter. Conversely, **Quran** tells us that those who are guided by no moral considerations other that expediency or social conformity and crave the freedom to do as they please, no matter how much worldly success and prosperity they attain or how keenly they are able to relish the short span of their earthly life, will be doomed as the losers on Judgment Day. Islam teaches us that in order to devote our exclusive attention to fulfilling our duties to God and to our fellow-beings; we must abandon all vain and useless activities which distract us from this end. These teachings of **Holy Quran**, made even more explicit by **Hadith**, were thoroughly compatible with my temperament. When I embraced Islam, my parents, relatives and their friends regarded me almost as

a fanatic, because I could think and talk of nothing else. To them, religion is a purely private concern which at the most perhaps could be cultivated like an amateur hobby among other hobbies. But as soon as I read **Holy Quran**, I knew that Islam was no hobby but life itself!

From the onset of my adolescence until my migration to Pakistan at the age of twenty-eight, I was a hopeless misfit. A young girl as serious minded as I was, always with a pile of books at the library, who abhorred the cinema, dancing and "pop" music, who did not enjoy "dating" and mixed parties and who took no interest in romance, glamour, cosmetics, jewelry or fashionable clothes, had to pay the full penalty of social ostracism for being "different."

From a bleak future in America, which had no place for a person like me, I escaped when migrated to Pakistan. Although Pakistan, like every other Muslim country, is being increasingly contaminated by the most noxious dirt from Europe and America, still a sufficient number of Pakistanis remain good Muslims to provide an environment which makes it possible for the individual to lead a life in conformity to what Islam teaches. At times, I must admit, I fail to apply to my own life what Islam demands that we practice, but I never indulge in far-fetched interpretations of **Quran** or **Sunnah** to justify my weaknesses and shortcomings. Whenever I do wrong, I readily admit it and try my best to rectify my mistake. The happiness I have found in my new life is entirely due to the fact that just those qualities of character and temperament, Western society ridicules and scorns, in Islam are most keenly appreciated and esteemed.

THE HOLY PROPHET AND HIS IMPACT ON MY LIFE

Ever since the days of my early childhood, my life has been dominated by a religious outlook. This does not even exclude my adolescence and early youth when, due to my disillusionment with the established Jewish synagogue and Christian churches, I professed atheism for even then, my life was religious in the sense that I was always in search for the absolute Truth which alone gives human life its meanings, direction and purpose. I was not, however, raised in a religious atmosphere. My family and their friends, having been thoroughly integrated into American life, were Jews only nominally. They were thoroughly decent, respectable, intelligent, broad-minded, cultured people who firmly believed in and observed all the basic moral laws yet they denied that ethical behavior was dependent upon theology; in fact, they could not even understand the relevance between the two. All of them regarded any conception of Divine reward and punishment in life after death as an outmoded superstitious belief of by-gone ages. Any concept of a personal Diety Who

directly intervenes into human affairs and would listen to the supplications of His devotees, Divine revelation and Prophethood was also scorned for the same reasons. As soon as I was repelled by the dominant values of my society, the purpose of which is happiness, pleasure and enjoyment while I longed above all else to achieve something eternally worth while. Since, according to this outlook, there are no answers to the ultimate, one must avoid thinking about them and just enjoy as best one can, the transitory pleasures life has to offer at the moment --- good health, tasty food, comfortable living, the love of family, the companionship of congenial friends and the variety of entertainments and amusements which modern America makes available in such abundance. Never ask oneself, why we were born, who created us, what is the purpose of our life, why we must die and what will happen to us after death, lest one be afflicted with depression, pessimism and despondency. Americans are often praised by outsiders because they are not "static" and love, nay, worship---Change. According to these "progressives," America is synonymous with Progress because it is supposedly the only country unimpeded by "rigid, archaic philosophies, social and religious, and therefore able to nourish creative Change." I never shared this worship of Change for its own sake. To me, the absence of permanence and stability in anything means the outright denial of its value and makes life frivolous and superficial. My quest was always for absolutes.

Neither Judaism nor Christianity could satisfy me. I was repelled by the narrow, parochial-mindedness of the synagogue and horrified by the atrocities of Zionism against the indigenous Arabs of Palestine. I could never reconcile myself to the complicated, incomprehensible theology of the Christians and the endless compromises of the Church with moral, social, political and economic evils. Both the synagogue and the Church, as I encountered them, were filled with corruption and hypocrisy. In the course of what Jewish training I received, it was but natural for me to be curious about the faith historically most closely akin to Judaism. I found that I could not learn about the Arabs without also learning about Islam and its civilization and as soon as I discovered that it was not the Arabs who had made Islam great but the other way around, I wanted to know as much about this faith as I could. The superiority of the **Quran** over the Bible to me lay in its all-embracing universality in contrast to the narrow, rigid nationalism of the Jewish scriptures. As this universality makes for the superior morality, it has exerted a drastic effect on the historical development of these religions and civilizations shaped by them.

In **Islam**, my quest for absolute values was satisfied. In **Islam** I found all that was true, good and beautiful and which gives meaning and direction to human life (and death) while in other religions, the Truth is deformed, distorted, restricted and fragmentary. If anyone chooses to ask me how I came to know this, **I can only reply that my personal life experience was sufficient to convince me.** My adherence to the Islamic faith is thus a calm, cool but very intense conviction. Unlike some other converts, I never saw the Holy Prophet in

my dreams during sleep at night; I never experienced any mystical vision and nothing dramatic at the time of my conversion ever happened. Since I have, I believe, always been a Muslim at heart and by temperament, even before I even knew there was such a thing as Islam, my conversion was mainly a formality, involving no radical change in my heart at all but rather only making official what I had been thinking and yearning for many years.

Soon after I began the study of the **Quran**, I discovered that a proper understanding of it is impossible without some knowledge of the relevant **Hadith**, for who is better qualified to interpret the **Quran** than the man to whom it was revealed? The **Quran** provides us with the general outline of the life ordained by Islam but only the **Hadith** fill in all the necessary details. To those who deny the validity of this only authoritative interpretation of **Quran**:

When the **Prophet's wife, Ayesha**, was asked to described the mode of his life and conduct, she replied; **"His morals are the Quran."** In other words, his daily life was a true picture of the **Quranic** teachings. He was an embodiment of all the virtues which have been enunciated by the **Quran**. The record of his life which sheds light on his conduct as a child, as a father, as a neighbor, as a merchant, as a preacher, as a persecuted fugitive, as a friend, as a warrior, as an army commander, as a conqueror, as a judge, as a law-giver, as a ruler and above all, as a devotee of Allah, was all an exemplification of the **Book of Allah.**

The sincerity and purity of his pious living was clearly revealed in his daily routine.

The daily routine of his life was extremely rigorous. After the dawn Salat, he received people so as to educate them. He even settled disputes and administered justice, received envoys and dictated dispatches and then the assembly was adjourned. The public function now over, he used to go to one of his wives and do any work she wanted. He even went to the market for shopping. Then another short prayer was performed after which he visited the sick and the poor and called at the houses of his friends and then he went to the mosque for Zuhr Salat. After returning from the mosque, he took his meal, if it was available, and then returned to his private apartment for some rest and then went again to the mosque for the Asr Salat. Afterwards the Holy Prophet would go to his wives and sit with them until children claimed his time. He led the Maghrib Salat and then took his evening meal and then returned to his home for prayers in solitude and rest. He slept for a few hours only and then rose and prayed and meditated and again retired to bed only for a brief time, rising again for the dawn Salat when the day's work began once more. His energy was extraordinary. He seldom complained of fatigue.

Now let us see how this pious life affected the activities of his womenfolk:

Hazrat Ali once asked one of his pupils: Shall I tell you the story of Fatima, the dearest and most loved daughter of Prophet? When the pupil replied in the affirmative, he said: "Fatima used to grind the grain herself which caused calluses on her hands. She carried water for the house in a leather bag which caused scars on her breast. She cleaned the house herself which made her clothes dirty. Once when some war-captives were brought to Medina, I said to her: "Go to the Prophet and request him for a servant to help you in your housework." She went to him but found many people round him. As she was very modest, she could not be bold enough to request the Prophet in the presence of other people. Next day the Prophet came to our house and said: "Fatima, what made you come to me yesterday?" She felt shy and kept quiet. I said: "O Prophet of Allah, Fatima has developed calluses on her hands and breasts on account of grinding grain and carrying water. She is constantly busy in cleaning the house and in other domestic work, causing her clothes to remain dirty. I informed her about the captives and advised her to go to you and request a servant." **The Prophet replied: "Fatima! Fear Allah! Acquire Taqwa (piety) and when you go to bed, recite, Subhanallah 33 times, Alhamdulillah 33 times and Allahu Akbar 34 times. This you will find more helpful than a servant."** Fatima said: "I am content with Allah and His Prophet."

And how did the Prophet's wives spend their time?

Ayesha said: Maymuna was the most pious and most faithful of her kin among all the Prophet's wives. She was seen either engaged in Salat or in domestic duties. When she was doing neither, she was busy cleaning her teeth with the miswaq.

This will not appeal to the advocates of the so-called "Women's Liberation." The immediate reaction of the modern-minded woman to this is dismay. She will certainly ask me how I as a twentieth-century woman, born and reared in modern America could possibly endorse such an apparently poor and limited life? The answer is that to the Holy Prophet, depth of experience was more important than breadth. The fast pace of modern, mechanized living where to be active and "always on the run" are in themselves regarded as supreme virtues, the experiences of modern men and women may be broad and varied, yet their minds remain superficial, fickle and shallow. I would point out to her the fact that many modern American women are unhappy even though they can do virtually anything they please. They enjoy the highest standard of living in history; they are the best-dressed, best-groomed, best-fed, best-housed women anywhere with the least drudgery; they have the most freedom, the greatest variety of interesting social contacts, are unexcelled in the extent of their secular education and have the widest possible opportunity to enrich their self-indulgence and can do whatever they want, yet despite all these material advantages, too many American women are restless, dissatisfied and even neurotic.

For the Holy Prophet, the purpose of life was achievement---not enjoyment. Pleasure and happiness in Islam are but the natural by-products of

emotional satisfaction in one's duties being conscientiously performed for the pleasure of God to gain salvation in the life to come. In the materialistic world, achievement is equated with the capturing of political or economic power, fulfillment in the arts and sciences and acquiring fame, if one is exceptionally gifted, or enjoying an ample income from business and commerce. In Islam, achievement is rated on accomplishing what is enduring and worth while through useful, benevolent and productive work and to refrain from wasting one's time in empty self-gratification disgraced by sinful deeds. The Supreme Achievement is to attain, through implicit obedience to **Quran** and **Sunnah**, eternal salvation in the world to come.

This was the dominant theme of all the teachings of the Holy Prophet as shown in the following oration which he delivered at the mosque in Medina in the first year of the Hijra :

O people! Make provision for yourselves in advance. You should know by Allah everyone of you will indeed faint; then he will leave his cattle without a shepherd. Then his Lord will say to him---while there will be neither any guide at hand nor any shelter to hide him---"Did My Messenger not approach you and deliver My revelation to you? I bestowed wealth and favor upon you. What provision did you make for yourself?" He will certainly look to the right and to the left but he will find nothing to help him. Then he will cast his glance to his front but will see only Hell-fire! So he who is able to save his face from the Fire, though by means only of a bit of date, should certainly do that and he who cannot afford it, then do it by means of a kind word. For the good action will be rewarded and increased from ten to seven hundred times.

And at Tabuk in Syria in 9 A.H. the Holy Prophet proclaimed :

Verily the most veracious discourse is the Book of Allah. The most trustworthy handhold is the word of piety. The best of the religions is the faith of **Ibrahim**. The best of precedents is the precedent of Muhammad. The noblest speech is the invocation of Allah. The finest narratives is this **Quran**; the best affairs is that which has been already firmly resolved upon and the worst thing in religion are innovations. The best of the ways is the path of the prophets. The noblest death is the death of martyrdom. The greatest blindness is going astray after guidance. The best of actions is that which benefits. The best guidance is that which is followed in practice. The worst blindness is the blindness of the heart.

The little but sufficient is better than the abundant but alluring. The worst apology is that which is made at the point of death. The worst regret is that which will be felt on the **Day of Resurrection**.

Thus the **Holy Prophet** has revealed to me personally and to all mankind for all times in all places the purpose of human life and what is important and what is

not. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism and classical Christianity, the **Holy Prophet** repudiated monasticism and self-mortification as the path to the spiritual life. With his perfect emotional balance, he did not shun the legitimate pleasures of this life. The **Holy Prophet** was endowed with a fine sense of humor and occasionally even joined children in their games but nevertheless he never ceased to emphasize that the interests of this world must always be subordinated by the Believer to that of the next world. He often told his Companions that "If you had seen what I have seen (of the Life Hereafter), you certainly would have laughed little and wept much."

The prayers and supplications of the **Holy Prophet** prove his unmatched devotion to Allah as the supreme end of life above all worldly considerations. Before going to sleep each night he never failed to plea:

> **O Allah! Save me from the pangs of the Day of Resurrection!**
> **O Allah! In Thy Name do I die and live.**

oOo

Maryam Jameelah

An Introduction

Maryam Jameelah was born in 1934 in New York at the height of the Great Depression a fourth-generation American of German Jewish origin.

She was reared in Westchester, one of the most prosperous and populated suburbs of New York and received a thoroughly secular American education at the local public schools. Always an above-average student, she soon became a passionate intellectual and insatiable bibliophile, hardly ever without a book in hand, her readings extending far beyond the requirements of the school curriculum. As she entered adolescence, she became intensely serious-minded, scorning all frivolities, which is very rare for an otherwise attractive young girl. Her main interests were religion, philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology and biology. The school and local community public libraries and later, the New York Public Library, became "her second home."

After her graduation from secondary school in the summer of 1952, she was admitted to New York University where she studied a general liberal arts program. While at the university, she became severely ill in 1953, grew

steadily worse and had to discontinue college two years later without earning any diploma. She was confined to private and public hospitals for two years (1957-1959) and only after her discharge did she discover her facility *for* writing. **Allama Muhammad Asad's** two book: -his autobiographical ***The Road to Mecca*** and **Islam at the Crossroads** ignited her interest in Islam and after correspondence with some prominent Muslims in Muslim lands and making intimate friends with some Muslim converts in New York, she embraced Islam at the Islamic Mission in Brooklyn; New York at the hand of Shaikh Daoud Ahmad Faisal, who then changed her name from Margaret Marcus to Maryam Jameelah.

During extensive correspondence with Muslims throughout the world and reading and making literary contributions to whatever Muslim periodicals were available in English, Maryam Jameelah became acquainted with the writings of **Maulana Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi** and so, beginning in December 1960 they exchanged letters regularly In the spring of 1962, **Maulana Maududi** invited Maryam Jameelah to migrate to Pakistan and live as a member of his family in Lahore. Maryam Jameelah accepted the offer and a year later, married Mohammad Yusuf Khan, a whole-time worker for the **Jama'at-e-Islami** who later became the publisher of all her books. She subsequently became the mother of four children, living with her co-wife and her children in a large extended household of in-laws. Most unusual for a woman after marriage, she continued all her intellectual interests and literary activities; in fact, her most important writings were done during and in between pregnancies. She observes *Purdah/Hijab* strictly.

Her hatred of atheism and materialism in all its varied manifestations-past and present-is intense and in her restless quest for absolute, transcendental ideals, she upholds Islam as the most emotionally arid intellectually satisfying explanation to the Ultimate Truth which alone gives life (and death) meaning, direction, purpose and value.